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Climbing Management Guidelines

1.0 Background

1.1 Purpose and Need for Action

The rock outcrops of Shenandoah National Park (SHEN) are some of the largest in the region and contain numerous significant vegetation communities and rare plant and animal populations. In 2005, SHEN initiated the three-year Rock Outcrop Management Project to conduct natural resources and recreation use assessments that culminated in the preparation and implementation of the 2012 Rock Outcrop Management Plan (ROMP) and Environmental Assessment (EA) to mitigate impacts of visitor recreation activities, accommodate visitor use, and direct the future management of fragile rock outcrop areas.

The National Park Service (NPS) *2006 Management Policies* directs that Superintendents develop and implement visitor use management plans and take action to ensure that recreational use and impacts do not cause unacceptable impacts to park resources or values. These SHEN Climbing Management Guidelines have been developed to protect the park's natural and cultural resources and values while providing climbing-related recreational opportunities for park visitors and address rock climbing, bouldering, and ice climbing recreational activities.

The basis for the Climbing Management Guidelines is at Alternative B, the "Preferred Alternative" of the 2012 ROMP and EA. A comprehensive assessment of natural resource conditions and recreation uses and impacts are provided in that document.

1.2 Climbing Management Goals

The goals of the Climbing Management Guidelines are to:

- (1) meet the National Park Service mandate to manage appropriate recreational use;
- (2) protect natural and cultural resources from recreational use impacts;
- (3) provide rock climbing and other climbing-related opportunities; and,
- (4) protect the backcountry and wilderness experiences of other park visitors.

2.0 Description of the Rock Outcrop Resource and Climbing Activities

2.1 Physical Description of the Climbing Resource

The report *A Natural Heritage Inventory of the Rock Outcrops of Shenandoah National Park – Final Report* (Fleming *et al.*, 2007), states that "rock exposures comprise approximately two percent of the park's more than 196,000 acres." Outcrops are found throughout the park's elevation range from below 1,000 ft to 4,050 ft at the summit of Hawksbill Mountain.

According to the report “many of the largest of the park’s rock outcrops have always been popular visitor destinations due to the dramatic scenery and vistas they afford, and some areas have received heavier impacts in recent years due to the increased popularity of rock climbing.”

SHEN’s rock outcrops support numerous rare plant and animal populations and significant natural communities. Human impacts and invasive plants were identified as the primary threats to the natural heritage resources of SHEN’s rock outcrops prior to and during the study. Trampling by visitors is the foremost human impact and is associated with all other visitor uses at SHEN rock outcrops: hiking, camping, climbing. Frequent visitation to outcrops results in loss of vegetation, lichen cover, and soils. Sites with high levels of visitation typically exhibit a high proportion of bare rock.

Presently, pre-historic archeological resources have not been identified at SHEN rock outcrop sites. Cultural resources at outcrop sites exist as historic trail features constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps, in particular the Appalachian Trail (AT), and historic features associated with the Skyline Drive Historic District.

SHEN contains 79,579 acres of federally designated wilderness. Nearly all rock outcrops located within and in close proximity to the Skyline Drive Historic District and AT are located outside wilderness. However, most rock outcrop sites outside those zones are in wilderness.

2.2 Description of Climbing Activities

The following recreational activities are generally rock outcrop-dependent in SHEN:

2.2.1 Rock Climbing

Rock climbing opportunities are rather limited at SHEN due to inaccessibility of many satisfactory park rock outcrop sites for this activity. Most climbing activity occurs in close proximity to the Skyline Drive at overlook rock outcrop vista clearings and at rock outcrop sites along or near the Appalachian Trail, and on Old Rag Mountain.

2.2.2 Bouldering

Bouldering activity is infrequent at SHEN, with only 5% of climbers at Old Rag and no climbers at Little Stony Man Cliffs describing themselves as participating in that activity as documented during the 2005 climber survey. Bouldering activity does not necessarily require rock outcrops, but requires only a substantial boulder or set of boulders.

2.2.3 Ice Climbing

Ice climbing activity is infrequent in the park, due to the seasonal requirements and specific conditions for the activity to occur. The activity is very specialized and most adequate ice climbing areas are located in backcountry and wilderness.

3.0 Description of Climbing Recreational Setting

3.1 Park Climbing History

Rock climbing has exploded in popularity in the United States over the last 20 years. In SHEN, the earliest known technical climbing was done in the late 1930s and early 1940s by members of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC). Most climbing and bouldering activities occur in close proximity to the Skyline Drive at overlook rock outcrop vista clearings and at rock outcrop sites along or near the Appalachian Trail, which parallels the Drive on the ridgetop and is easily accessible from the Drive along its 101-mile length.

Little Stony Man Cliffs has long been the Park's most popular climbing site, and Old Rag Mountain provides unique climbing opportunities but requires a substantial hike to access the summit area rock outcrops. A couple of climbing guidebooks, *The Virginia Climber's Guide* (Watson, 1998) which describes over 400 climbing routes at 27 separate locations throughout the park, and *Rock Climbing Virginia, West Virginia and Maryland* (Horst, 2001) and various websites and blogs provide information about climbing opportunities in SHEN.

Some adverse impacts to the environment have occurred as a result of climbing and other recreation activities on rock outcrops. Rock climbing was addressed briefly by the 1998 SHEN *Backcountry and Wilderness Management Plan* (BWMP) and stated as a future action: "*Develop a Climbing Plan as a subplan to the BWMP with public involvement from organizations such as the PATC Mountaineering Section, The Access Fund, National Outdoor Leadership School and local climbing enthusiasts. SNP needs to better understand and address impacts to resources associated with climbing activity and assure that actions taken are consistent with NPS recreation and wilderness management directives and guidelines.*"

4.0 Management Actions

4.1 Climbing Areas

Climbers are encouraged to use pre-existing "established" climbing routes as identified in online or commercially available climber's guides to minimize recreation impacts to fragile rock outcrop natural resources. However, all of the park's backcountry and wilderness rock outcrop areas are open to climbing activity unless specifically designated as "closed" on a permanent or seasonal basis. SHEN managers recognize that undeveloped "wilderness" climbing areas provide outstanding opportunities for exploration, challenge and solitude for

climbers, but those users should be especially highly skilled and experienced in Leave No Trace climbing ethics and techniques.

4.2 Group Size Limits

Although the impacts of larger groups can be offset by Leave No Trace practices and techniques, larger group size nevertheless does contribute to crowding conditions and expansion of impacted sites. It is recommended that climbing groups limit their size to no more than **12 people** total to help minimize impacts of their activities on rock outcrop resources and in consideration of other visitors.

4.3 Climbing Practices

4.3.1 Leave No Trace and “Clean Climbing”

Climbers are strongly urged to use the seven principles of Leave No Trace (LNT) to promote “clean climbing” practices and in all other associated recreational activities in SHEN. The LNT Principles of outdoor ethics form the framework of Leave No Trace's message:

1. Plan Ahead and Prepare
2. Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces
3. Dispose of Waste Properly
4. Leave What You Find
5. Minimize Campfire Impacts
6. Respect Wildlife
7. Be Considerate of Other Visitors

The *Rock Climbing Ethics and Skills* guide is available to the public by the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics.

4.3.2 Fixed Anchors

Fixed anchors should be uncommon park-wide and rare in designated wilderness. The following policy applies to management of fixed anchors in the park:

Definition: Fixed anchors shall be deemed any man-made article made up of hardware (bolts, pitons) that require drilling or alteration of rock for installation and are left in the rock for future use.

The following conditions have been established regarding Fixed Anchors:

- The placement of new fixed anchors requiring rock alteration for installation will be prohibited when the ability to place removable protection is available.
- The use of non-climbing specific hardware (ie, concrete anchors, home-made equipment) is prohibited.

4.3.3 Fixed Belay/Rappel Stations

Definition: A fixed belay/rappel station shall be deemed any configuration of fixed anchor hardware, requiring rock alteration for installation, placed at the top of a climbing pitch for the primary purposes of belaying or rappelling.

The following conditions have been established regarding Fixed Belay/Rappel Stations:

- The placement of new fixed belay/rappel stations will be prohibited when the ability to place adequate removable protection is available.
- New fixed belay/rappel stations shall not be installed where their presence would visually impact the park (ie – within view of an overlook or trail).
- New fixed belay/rappel stations shall be constructed with modern climbing bolts or pitons.
- Bolt placement shall be kept to a minimum and shall not exceed three bolts.
- Chains used in the construction of the station shall be kept to a minimal length to avoid visual impacts.
- The use of webbing and accessory cord fixed stations is prohibited.
- Belay/rappel stations shall be constructed using hardware which has been painted a color similar to the natural rock color in the surrounding area.

4.3.4 Use of Trees as Anchors

- The use of trees as anchors shall be prohibited if such use causes interference with any park-maintained trail. Interference includes any rope or webbing that extends across a park trail, whether elevated off the ground or not. The anchor must be made in such a way as to avoid all physical damage to trees and plants, such as damage to bark or lichen growth and the removal of any branches.

4.3.5 Motorized Equipment

- The use of motorized drilling device used for the purpose of placing bolts, anchors or climbing equipment is prohibited.

4.3.6 Practices including gardening, gluing, chipping, etc

The following activities are prohibited park-wide:

- Chipping or gluing

- “Gardening” or the intentional removal of vegetation to “clean” or improve access to the route
- Other modification or alterations of resource features
- Leaving fixed ropes and other equipment for a period longer than 24 hours.

4.4 Climbing Area Closures and Restrictions

4.4.1 Temporary Closures to Climbing Activity:

Peregrine Falcon Restoration Project

Temporary seasonal closures may occur annually at some rock outcrop sites and

Adjoining trails due to peregrine falcon restoration project activities.

During certain seasons, typically February through July breeding and nesting seasons, specific cliff areas and trails may be closed to visitor use to minimize human disturbance to peregrines to give them the best chance of successful breeding. It is essential to provide nesting peregrines with adequate buffer from human disturbances such as noise and activity in close proximity to the birds. Peregrine nesting activity has required closures near Hawksbill Summit and Franklin Cliffs. Most recently, the lower cliffs of Stony Man and some sites on Old Rag Mountain have been closed to visitor activity.

In March to April park staff and volunteers conduct cliff surveys of high probability peregrine nesting areas and historic aeries throughout the park, including Old Rag Mountain, Hawksbill Mountain, Brown Mountain Cliffs, and other sites. Temporary seasonal closures of outcrop sites and trails will be implemented as necessary if breeding pairs or nesting activity is detected.

4.4.2 Summary of Permanent Area Restrictions or Closures to Climbing Activity

A range of management tools used to preserve resources while providing for visitor enjoyment of SHEN’s rock outcrops is provided in the 2012 ROMP and EA. Most rock outcrop management relies on off-site educational trailhead bulletin displays, internet and print information, informational and education programs, and improvement of informal trails to concentrate recreation use to minimize site impacts. Some areas require the use of physical barriers and signage to protect sites impacted by recreation use. A few sites used for climbing activities require more intensive management actions to restore damaged resources or preserve valuable, sensitive resources from degradation by human recreational activities.

Those sites closed to off-trail uses including climbing are:

- **Little Stony Man Cliffs (Fig. 1):** All off-trail areas of Little Stonyman mountain located south of an east/west line situated 35 meters north of the informal “chute trail” are closed to climbing and all other off-trail uses. Also closed to climbing and other off-trail uses is the area of large boulders on the northernmost end of the Little Stonyman cliffs between the AT and Passamaquoddy Trail (Figure 1).

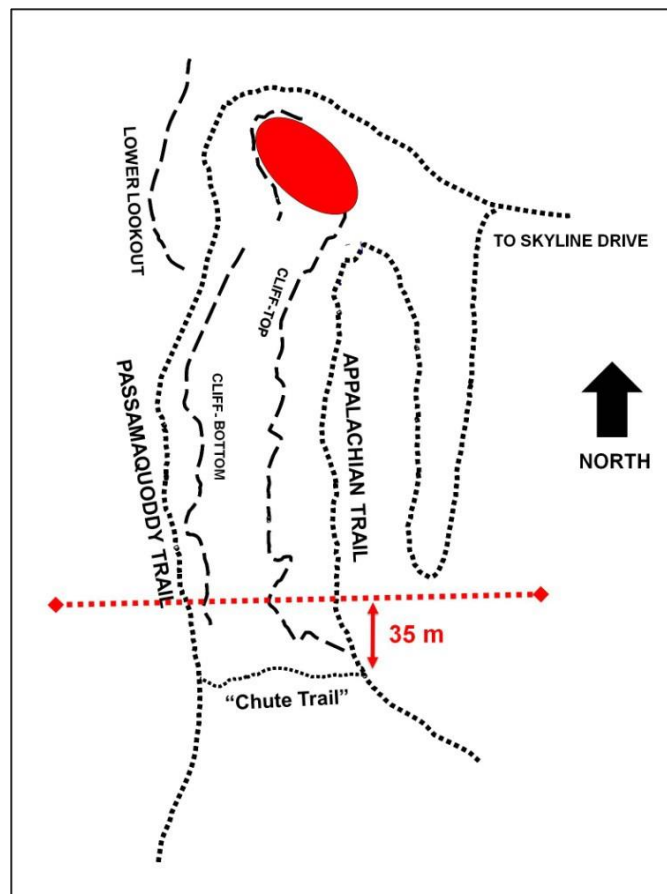


Figure 1. The red portion of the above diagram and all points on Little Stony Man Mountain south of the red dashed line are closed to climbing and all other off-trail uses.

- **Hawksbill Summit:** The summit area and cliff faces are closed to all climbing activity.

Other sites have been targeted for close monitoring of climbing and visitor impacts, because they harbor highly restricted globally rare natural communities that are showing signs of human impact. These sites may

have further restrictions or prohibitions imposed in the future if resource damage intensifies. These “watch” sites include:

- **North Marshall Summit**
- **Old Rag West Summit area**
- **Marys Rock**

4.5 Education

Education of the visiting public and park staff is key to protecting rock outcrop resources. The ROMP seeks to implement a vigorous education program, including on-site programs, printed and electronic literature including a Climbing brochure, climbing information at the park’s website, and trailhead bulletin displays.

4.6 Wilderness

Climbing management in the park’s designated wilderness areas will be conducted in the spirit of the Wilderness Act of 1964 and ensuing wilderness legislation. Any actions which have potential to impact wilderness character and quality, and/or may include one of the “prohibited uses” of wilderness must be evaluated by a “Minimum Requirements Analysis.”

In accordance with the Wilderness Act of 1964, NPS Director’s Order #41, and the SHEN Backcountry and Wilderness Management Plan, the “minimum requirements” for administration of Shenandoah National Park wilderness is documented by a Decision Guide. The Guide is used to evaluate proposed uses and activities in wilderness and, if they are allowed, the most appropriate methods (“minimum tool”) to accomplish those actions. *The minimum requirement decision process applies to all actions, programs, and activities within wilderness.*

4.7 SHEN Administrative Uses of Rock Outcrops

SHEN staff and cooperators engage in a variety of activities that may impact rock outcrop resources. Leaders and participants in activities such as scientific research, educational programs, and technical search and rescue training must maintain an awareness of the sensitivity of these resources to human impacts.

4.7.1 Search and Rescue

SHEN staff are frequently involved in Search and Rescue incidents throughout the park, and SHEN maintains a trained technical rescue team to respond to technical and semi-technical rescue needs. The Technical Rescue Team trains frequently, often utilizing practical training sessions at rock outcrop/cliff sites to hone their skills. The team uses much of the same equipment, practices and techniques as that of recreational climbers.

Consistent with National Park Service policy, park staff will undertake rescue operations for those in need, unless the level of risk to the rescue party is found to be unacceptably high and until conditions improve or other options become available. . Efforts will be made to provide necessary treatment and services to the sick, injured, and stranded consistent with National Park Service policy. In all cases, the safety and well-being of the rescue personnel and the public will be of utmost importance.

Rescue work has a high potential for causing damage to natural resources due to the focused nature of rescue, treatment, and transport of an injured or ill patient. Training sessions and rescue emergencies require a group of at least several individuals congregating on rock outcrop sites, and will very likely involve litter lowering and raising along a cliff face.

Technical Rescue Team members should be aware of rock outcrop protection issues, and ensure rock outcrop natural resource protection during their training activities and, to the extent possible, during emergency responses.

